

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 818

CS 202 680

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TITLE The Doublespeak of Basics.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Quality; *English Instruction; Language Role; *Literacy; *Propaganda; Social Influences
IDENTIFIERS *Public Doublespeak

ABSTRACT

Public thinking and writing about literacy in recent years has served to confuse and mislead. Facts which support the "decline in literacy" belief and facts which support the opposite view are presented. Phases and statements made publicly about literacy are discussed and placed into four categories: those which use syntax to posit certainty where none exists; statements which are plainly false or which imply generalizations that have no basis in reality; those which treat language and writing as organisms; and those which propose to give causes and explanations for the "decline in literacy." It is argued that perhaps the "decline in literacy" is related to the broadening base of the educational system--expanding to admit previously excluded groups to higher levels--and that translates partly into an increase in equality and social justice. (TS)

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ED120818

CS 202680

The Doublespeak of Basics

Dick Ohmann

What's basic about doublespeak, we're asked. Well, one way to get into the question is to turn it around. I presume that the CCCC has chosen "what's really basic" as theme for this convention because there has been much public agitation on the matter of literacy. That agitation has been expressed in language: how adequate is the public language of literacy and basics, in helping all of us understand the facts of literacy in 1976? I've looked at a sample of such language, and in this talk I want to register a simple and fairly obvious point about it: almost all of it is doublespeak, once we look beyond factual reporting to generalizations and explanations. Public thinking and writing about literacy these past three years has served to confuse and mislead. It has created a phantom, and blocked out a part of reality that does merit real concern.

To begin at the beginning, let's see how public writers refer to the present situation. List #1 gives some examples. Those articles and demonstratives contain a definite though muted ontological claim. They place the decline in literacy or writing ability, in the same ontological condition as do phrases like "the decline in traffic fatalities" and "the decline in SAT scores" for the phenomena they describe. But it's not the same. The decline in literacy is more like the present King of France, and a sentence that links it to a predicate is rather like "The present King of France is bald"--the sentence that gave rise to Russell's paradox and fifty years of moderately fruitless philosophical debate.

Now I don't precisely equate the two: there definitely is no present King of France. I do not contend that there definitely is no decline in literacy, but only that it's impossible to tell whether there is or isn't one--if "the decline in literacy" means what it sounds like, and is not just a misleading reference in code to some test result or other.

I've tried to collect the relevant facts. Here are some which support those who would like to use the definite article with "decline in literacy";

- 1) SAT verbal scores have declined since 1964, with the biggest drop last year. Similar declines are recorded on the ACT tests, the Minnesota SAT, and the Iowa tests.
- 2) The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that in 1974, 13- and 17- year-olds wrote in a more "primer-like" style, with more run-on sentences, and with more incoherent paragraphs than did the same age-groups in 1970. The poorer writers are worse than before. And among 13-year-olds, the percentage of good writers also declined.
- 3) According to a large USOE study run by the University of Texas, only 49% of people 18 to 29 years old have adequate command of the skills used in making a living and sustaining a household-compared to 60% of those 30 to 39 years old.

But here are some facts that support the opposite view.

- 1) PSAT scores were up between 1960 and 1966, and again between 1970 and 1972.
- 2) The NAEP study showed that the percentage of good writers among 17-year-olds has gone up, that 9-year-olds are better writers than their counterparts four years ago, and that all three age groups adequately handled basics--spelling, punctuation, agreement, usage, etc.
- 3) An American Institutes of Research study showed a slight improvement in the reading test scores for high school seniors between 1960 and 1970.
- 4) According to the Texas study, of functional literacy and competence in negotiating our world, the least competent groups are the older ones.
- 5) In its somewhat different test, NAEP found that the functional literacy of 17-year-olds increased from 88% to 90% between 1971 and 1974.

And so it goes. I apologize for this ill-sorted clutter of facts, but something like it is necessary in order to understand how little the pundits understand. ETS, USOE and two other organizations sponsored a wide survey of reading test results last year. The researchers found no solid evidence of a decline in reading ability, and concluded this way: "We are now convinced that anyone who says he knows that literacy is decreasing. . . is at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest." I know of no similar survey of tests of writing ability, but if there were one I believe it would turn out much the same.

On the evidence at hand, then, phrases like those in

list #1 are doublespeak, not because their implication is surely false, but because they use syntax to posit certainty where none exists; they do an end run around argument and thought, by a simple act of reification. My list #2 includes doublespeak of an equally elementary sort. Some of the statements are plainly false, even ludicrous, if taken literally. But that's not my concern; open falsehood and hyperbole are easy to detect. The doublespeak here is in lumping together a great variety of young people in formulas like "today's college students" and "a generation of semi-literates." Which students? Semi-literate in what ways? Compared to whom? As soon as we confront the noun phrases with such questions, we open up a package of extraordinarily complicated phenomena, which can't be summarized without reference to social class, the economics of education, and some historical framework. The phrases create a kind of pseudo-history, a history of literacy divorced from all other social fact. And they imply a neat division into generations that has no basis in reality. In short, this kind of doublespeak blocks analysis and prevents thought about the connections among phenomena.

A further plunge into confusion and mystery comes with the kind of doublespeak represented in list #3. These expressions treat a system--the English language--or a complex set of attributes and performances--writing ability--as if it were an organism whose health could be measured. Speaking

and writing are now split off entirely from people. Personified in this way, language and ability can be conceived of as ailing, withering, regressing into cretinization, suffering breakdown--under attack, I presume, by bacteria, forces of decay, and neurosis. If speech and writing can sicken in this way, they might actually die: no wonder Professor Giamatti is terrified. And no wonder we get predictions like those I've included in list #3a.

Once our prophets have reified, personified, and generalized in all three of these ways, creating a host of dubious entities, it's not surprising that they begin finding dubious links between them and the rest of what's going on in the world, not surprising that logic, interpretation, and the use of evidence take some strange turns. As witness list #4.

When people set out to find the causes of an event that may or may not have happened, and whose nature is unknown, you can expect a certain amount of floundering. The most amusing side of the current lamentations is the case of villains--plain and exotic, individual and collective--assembled by our writers to account for the decline in literacy. Here are some: teachers' refusal to teach writing, the "creative school" among English teachers, structural linguistics, Webster's Third, political activism, the CCCC statement on dialect, less teaching of grammar, English teachers who themselves can't write, educationists and their jargon, lack of respect for rules, the new sentimentality,

the mono-syllabic speech habits of the young, open admissions programs, mass education, the political movement of the sixties, Vietnam, Watergate, non-verbal parents, children's books, replacement of writing by telephone conversations, advertisements, popular songs, textbooks written at the ninth grade level for twelfth grade students, the complexity and illogic of the English language, students with tin ears, Kahlil Gibran, Kurt Vonnegut, Hermann Hesse, Abbie Hoffman, Steve Judy, Liz McPherson, Zen Buddhism, the new primitivism, drugs, permissiveness, the federal government. And poor television, with its "linguistic sludge" (Yale Alumni Magazine), its "paltry fare" (H. Mark Johnson), its "simplistic spoken style" (Newsweek), its "new plagues" of jargon (Jean Stafford). If each of these things and people really causes young people to write less well, it's amazing that all of them taken together have not brought on terminal paralysis of the collective American forearm. Of course another possibility is that the decline in literacy has been accompanied by a decline in intelligence, especially pronounced among those who write about the decline in literacy.

Fortunately, studies are beginning to appear which, if noticed by the pundits, might help combat doublespeak and double-think on this subject. Two of them were reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 17. They bear, not on the ontologically doubtful decline in literacy, but on the quite real decline in test scores over the past ten years.

Here are four other things that have happened during those years, each of which may well have a bearing on test scores, and which, taken together, suggest a kind of explanation rather different from what one can read in Time and Newsweek. First, from 1971 to 1973 alone, enrollment of high school students in English courses dropped 11% nationally. On the assumption that at least some of what English teachers teach shows up on tests, this could explain a lot. (There were similar drops, by the way, in math enrollments.) Second, absences from school increased during this period. Conceivably going to school makes a difference. Third, there were fewer drop-outs from high school--i.e., more students taking the standard tests from that part of the population that used to leave school before senior year. And fourth, the decline in ACT scores has taken place almost entirely among women. Why? Between 1965 and 1975 the percent of test-takers who were women increased from 45% to 55%. The researcher inferred, as I would, that this means young women feel less excluded from education now than ten years ago: many who would not have had a try at college then are doing so now; and a further inference is possible, that this group is lower in ability than the women who used to choose higher education. If so, the "decline in literacy" translates partly into an increase in equality and social justice. Is that what Newsweek's mad about?

This last hypothesis points toward another one. When a deplorable cultural event which may or may not have occurred

is widely noted, and when journalists, bureaucrats, and professors scramble to explain it, I think that what most needs explaining is the journalistic phenomenon, itself. Why the outcry? Wally Douglas, who has read deeply in the history of composition and of attitudes toward it, says that each time the American educational system has expanded to admit previously excluded groups to higher levels, there has been such a chorus of voices lamenting the decline in standards and foreseeing the end of western civilization.

Be that as it may, one thing is certain: those who are quoted in the media belong almost without exception to our cultural elite. A Bartlett Giamatti is Professor of English at Yale, the most mandarin department in the country. H. Mark Johnson teaches at a selective (though progressive) private school. Sidney P. Marland is president of the College Board. Roger Shattuck is Commonwealth Professor of French at the University of Virginia. Ronald Berman is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Jean Stafford is a New Yorker writer. Jacques Barzun is retiring as a Columbia professor.

Note further that most of the fuss is about the grammatical, stylistic, and conceptual abilities of the elite and near-elite among our young people--those who are in college or hope to get there. Doubtless an increase in solecisms and run-on sentences among this group would be cause for worry. But to me it seems a relatively minor matter, even if it should prove (as it hasn't) to be real. Far more

worthy of concern, in my scheme of things, are the results emerging from the Texas studies of functional literacy--the verbal abilities needed to get along minimally in our society. According to these studies one American adult in five is functionally illiterate, and another large group are incapable of understanding such things as the law against detaining an arrested person without bringing charges and the concept of an equal opportunity employer. This is nothing new, and apparently nothing Time or Newsweek would care to do a cover story about. Why not? And since schooling does seem to make most people literate, and more and better schooling would make more people literate, why do we not have more and better schooling for the kinds of people who continue to come out of American education as functional illiterates? Such people are economically inept, in our productive system, and can hardly be effective as citizens of a complex industrial democracy. I think it's worth asking a different set of questions from those which Time and Newsweek have so encrusted in doublespeak. In particular, do those who control our economic and educational systems really want a totally literate work force, given that there are too few jobs to go around, and too few intelligent jobs for the literate and capable workers who now exist? And do they really want the most exploited people in America to command the skills of thought, speech, writing, and organization which could make them a political force?

The Doublespeak of Basics

1. The present King of France

the decline in reading and writing abilities (Sidney P. Marland)
this decline in the most basic function of education (Roger Shattuck)
this decline (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
the inability of students to express themselves (Yale Alumni Magazine)
the breakdown in writing (Newsweek)
the new illiteracy (Newsweek)
the decline in writing ability (Time)
an indifference to language (Time)

2. Pseudo-history and pseudo-sociology

Today's college students. . . have lost touch with language (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
young people today can't write (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
the television generation's apparent inability to write standard English (Chicago Tribune)
a generation of semi-literates (Newsweek)
students' reading ability is declining (Newsweek)
Why Johnny Can't Write (Newsweek cover)
we have ceased to think in words (Jacques Barzun)
students can't write (Yale Alumni Magazine)

3. Language and writing as organisms

the condition of the real language is critical (Jean Stafford)
the ailing language (Jean Stafford)
the cretinization of language (Roger Shattuck)
the breakdown in writing (Newsweek)
the ability to use language is withering (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
the state of the English language (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
a literary breakdown (Karl Shapiro)
regression toward the intellectually invertebrate (Ronald Berman)

3a. Literary culture is through (Marshall McLuhan)
we will soon find ourselves back in Babel (Newsweek)
I predict that the language will not die in my lifetime, but I fear
that it will be assailed by countless cerebral accidents and massive
strokes . . . (Jean Stafford)

4. Causes and explanations

From the Free Speech Movement to the Bay Area Writing Project in
just ten years (A. Bartlett Giamatti)
this attitude [that all complexity can be avoided in the name of communality
and desire] persists because of what we are doing to language
(A. Bartlett Giamatti)
Another cause of bad writing is the complexity and illogic of the
English language itself (H. Mark Johnson)
the cretinization of language results from. . . the monosyllabic speech
habits of the young. . . (Roger Shattuck)
the decline in writing ability shows up even at Harvard, where all under-
graduates must take a twelve-week course in expository writing (Time)
some argue that the decline in English standards results from the increase
of mass education, and from open admissions programs (Time)
[the decline in SAT] scores tells us something real and terrifying about the
state of the English language (A. Bartlett Giamatti)